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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CALCUTTA 000372

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR SA/INS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM PGOV KRM CASC SOCI IN ASEC

SUBJECT: ETHNIC VIOLENCE FLARES IN ASSAM

11. (U) Summary: Between September 26 and October 18, ethnic violence in the Karbi Anglong district of the Northeast Indian state of Assam claimed 73 lives. Conflict over territorial control and retaliation between the insurgent groups of the Karbi and Dimasa tribals has instigated the bloodbath. The Congress-led state government, facing elections in May 2006, is attempting to initiate negotiations and confidence-building measures to restore normal relations between the two communities. However, opposition political parties have criticized the state Congress leaders for failing to respond quickly enough to stem the violence. End Summary.

12. (U) Since September 26, ethnic violence in Karbi Anglong district in Northeast India's Assam state has claimed 73 lives. During the first week of October, clashes between Karbi and Dimasa tribals left 31 dead and 400 houses torched. On October 17, suspected Dimasa militants killed 34 Karbi bus passengers - hacking 26 of them to death -- and burned more than 125 houses. On October 18, 167 houses were destroyed. The war between the two tribes began on September 26, when three Dimasas were hacked to death by Karbi militants. Two days later, in retaliation three Karbis were killed. A "tit-for-tat" situation now prevails, with escalating atrocities on both sides. To protect those caught in the middle, the District administration has set up relief camps to shelter tribals who fled their homes when their villages were attacked. Curfew has also been imposed.

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REBELS BATTLE FOR TERRITORY  
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13. (U) On several occasions in the past, Karbi Anglong has witnessed ethnic violence involving Karbis and other communities. This time, hostilities with the Dimasas have intensified and the involvement of militant groups has aggravated the situation. According to the police, the ethnic war is perpetrated by militant outfits - the Karbis United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) and the Dimasas Dima Halong Daogah (DHD). Both groups are under a ceasefire with the GOI, but are now in a battle with each other for territorial control in Karbi Anglong. The UPDS demands a separate homeland for Karbis and the DHD wants the same for the Dimasas. Both groups claim territory in Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills districts.

14. (SBU) The Karbi Longri North Cachar Hills Liberation Front (KLNLF), a breakaway faction of the UPDS and opposed to talks with the GOI, may also be participating in the killings. DHD Chairman Dilip Nunisa reportedly blamed the outfit's "anti-talks" faction "Black Widow" for the violence, denying that the main outfit was responsible. A senior Assam police official told post that although there is little doubt that militants are responsible for the carnage, it is difficult to specifically identify the culprits since the site is very remote, communication poor and the terrain difficult. Most of the area is inaccessible for the administration and the police.

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SEEKING A SOLUTION  
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15. (SBU) Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi has ordered a judicial probe into the violence. The state government has also suggested that the UPDS and DHD negotiate for peace. On October 18, Gogoi met the UPDS leadership, which reportedly demanded the immediate shifting of the DHD designated camp - that are established after a militant group has signed ceasefire agreements with the GOI -- from the Dhansiri area of Karbi Anglong. The cadres of this camp are allegedly involved in the violence. The state government also plans to meet DHD leaders. A Congress Minister told CONGEN that the government is adopting confidence-building measures to ensure the Karbis and Dimasas agree to coexist peacefully, since the problem cannot be solved by deploying security forces alone. He asserted that Assam (home of more than 30 tribes) has historically been an arena for ethnic conflict.

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FLAK FROM THE OPPOSITION  
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16. (U) Meanwhile, opposition political parties including the

Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have held the state's ruling Congress responsible for failing to stop the mayhem. They note that the Congress Party also has the majority of the representatives in the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) that locally governs Karbi Anglong district. The BJP has demanded imposition of President's Rule in the state. The state unit of the Communist Party of India (CPI) has held the Congress government responsible for the massacres and demanded the government ensure no further casualties.

17. (SBU) Comment: The Congress-led Assam government is anxious to stop the escalating violence as soon as possible. State elections are expected in May 2006 and the government had already been working to resolve a host of other insurgencies, such advocating negotiations between the GOI and the major insurgent group, the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA). However, this recent fighting reflects how fractious the communities are in Assam and constitutes a significant setback for the government. CM Gogoi is now desperately applying available resources to both security and political confidence-building measures to tackle the situation.

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